THREE EXCERPTS FROM

BLACK TICKETS

HOME

I'm afraid Walter Cronkite has had it, says Mom. Roger Mudd always does the news now–how would you like to have a name like that? Walter used to do the conventions and a football game now and then. I mean he would sort of appear, on the sidelines. Didn't he? But you never see him anymore. Lord. Something is going on.

Mom, I say. Maybe he's just resting. He must have made a lot of money by now. Maybe he's tired of talking about elections and mine disasters and the collapse of the franc. Maybe he's in love with a young girl.

He's not the type, says my mother. You can tell that much. No, she says, I'm afraid it's cancer.

My mother has her suspicions. She ponders. I have been home with her for two months. I ran out of money and I wasn't in love, so I have come home to my mother. She is an educational administrator. All winter long after work she watches television and knits afghans.

Come home, she said. Save money.

I can't possibly do it, I said. Jesus, I'm twenty-three years old.

Don't be silly, she said. And don't use profanity.

She arranged a job for me in the school system. All day, I tutor children in remedial reading. Sometimes I am so discouraged that I lie on the couch all evening and watch television with her. The shows are all alike. Their laugh tracks are conspicuously similar; I think I recognize a repetition of certain professional laughters. This laughter marks off the half hours.

Finally I make a rule: I won't watch television at night. I will watch only the news, which ends at 7:30. Then I will go to my room and do God knows what. But I feel sad that she sits there alone, knitting by the lamp. She seldom looks up.

Why don't you ever read anything? I ask.

I do, she says I read books in my field. I read all day at work, writing those damn proposals. when I come home I want to relax.

Then let's go to the movies.

I don't want to go to the movies, Why should I pay money to be upset or frightened?

But feeling something can teach you. Don't you want to learn anything?
I'm learning all the time, she says.

She keeps knitting. She folds yarn the color of cream, the color of snow. She works it with her long blue needles, piercing, returning, winding. Yarn cascades from her hands in long panels. A pattern appears and disappears. She stops and counts; so many stitches across, so many down. Yes, she is on the right track.

Occasionally I offer to buy my mother a subscription to something mildly informative: Ms., Rolling Stone, Scientific American.

I don't want to read that stuff, she says. Just save your money. Did you hear Cronkite last night? Everyone's going to need all they can get.
Often, I need to look at my mother's old photographs. I see her sitting in knee-high grass with a white gardenia in her hair. I see her dressed up as the groom in a mock wedding at a sorority party, her black hair pulled back tight. I see her formally posed in her cadet nurse's uniform. The photographer has painted her lashes too lushly, too long; but her deep red mouth is correct.

The war ended too soon. She didn't finish her training. She came home to nurse only her mother and to meet my father at a dance. She married him in two weeks. It took twenty years to divorce him.

When we traveled to a neighboring town to buy my high school clothes, my mother and I would pass a certain road that turned off the highway and wound to a place I never saw.

There it is, my mother would say. The road to Wonder Bar. That's where I met my Waterloo. I walked in and he said, 'There she is. I'm going to marry that girl.' Ha. He sure saw me coming.

Well, I asked, why did you marry him?

He was older, she said. He had a job and a car. And Mother was so sick. My mother doesn't forget her mother.

Never one bedsore, she says. I turned her every fifteen minutes. I kept her skin soft and kept her clean, even to the end.

Imagine my mother at twenty-three; her black hair, her dark eyes, her olive skin and that red lipstick. She is growing lines of tension in her mouth Her teeth press into her lower lip as she lifts the woman in the bed. The woman weighs no more than a child. She has a smell. My mother fights it continually; bathing her, changing her sheets, carrying her to the bathroom so the smell can be contained and flushed away. My mother will try to protect them both. At night she sleeps in the room on a cot. She struggles awake feeling something press down on her and suck her breath: the smell. When my grandmother can no longer move, my mother fights it alone.

I did all I could, she sighs. And I was glad to do it. I'm glad I don't have to feel guilty.

No one has to feel guilty, I tell her.

And why not? says my mother. There's nothing wrong with guilt. If you are guilty, you should feel guilty.

My mother has often told me that I will be sorry when she is gone.

SOLO DANCE

She hadn't been home in a long time. Her father had a cancer operation; she went home. She went to the hospital every other day, sitting for hours beside his bed. She could see him flickering. He was very thin and the skin on his legs was soft and pure like fine paper. She remembered him saying 'I give up' when he was angry or exasperated. Sometimes he said it as a joke, 'Jesus Christ, I give up.' She kept hearing his voice in the words now even though he wasn't saying them. She read his get-well cards aloud to him. One was from her mother's relatives. Well, he said, I don't think they had anything to do with it. He was speaking of his divorce two years before.

She put lather in a hospital cup and he got up to shave in the mirror. He had to lean on the sink. She combed the back of his head with water and her fingers. His hair was long after six weeks in the hospital, a gray-silver full of shadow and smudge. She helped him get slowly into bed and he lay against the pillows breathing heavily. She sat down again. I can't wait till I get some weight on me, he said, So I can knock down that son-of-a-bitch lawyer right in front of the courthouse.

She sat watching her father. His robe was patterned with tiny horses, sorrels in arabesques. When she was very young, she had started ballet lessons. At the first class her teacher raised her leg until her foot was flat against the wall beside her head. He held it there and looked at her. She looked back at him, thinking to herself it didn't hurt and willing her eyes dry.
Her father was twisting his hands. How's your mother? She must be half crazy by now. She wanted to be by herself and brother that's what she got.

STARS

All winter in Florida he poked his cane at calcified dog turds and swore. In summers he sat on the porch in West Virginia, yelling for the fly swatter and shooting at groundhogs in his fields across the road; so proud of the girl he fathered at sixty. Jit! he yelled, Jitterbugger! Bring the swatter out here!
That summer she was nine. We read Star Parade in a tiny back bedroom strung with ribbons from horse shows in the forties. I was a little older but she was taller, her eyes were cerulean and her legs were freckled. When he dies we won't come back here anymore, she said, and her mother, a heavy woman in her fifties with shoulder-length white hair and those same pure eyes, spent afternoons in town. Jit had to sweep the linoleum floors with a broom. He spat in a bucket and she emptied it. We went behind the house to pick mint for his pitchers of ice water; she cracked the ice trays in the sink and cursed him in even tones. He was deaf and couldn't hear unless she yelled. Lazy Jitterbug? he shouted. Where's my water? The sparse white hairs on his concave chest were damp and he wiped his armpits with a towel. Here, you old buzzard, she said. What's that? he asked, and watched her lips. Sir, she said. Yes sir.

Finally he went to sleep in the room with the double bed. We walked up to the snake pit on the winding cow paths and threw pebbles at copperheads coiled on the rocks. Cows gathered

farther down at the trough, licking the salt block to a bulging oval. Sometimes she walked, slow motion, into their midst, then turned up her head and screamed. They jerked, stumbling away, and rolled their broad eyes like palsied girls.

When the heat was worst we slipped through the double doors of the old garage. The mossy walls were covered with license plates of dead Mercurys and photos of their ghostly two- tone fins. Burlap bags of feed, torn lawn furniture, hoses and pieces of cars; a radio that played Top Ten at three in the afternoon. We lay on a cot pretending we were Troy Donahue and Sandra Dee, touching each other's stomachs and never pulling our pants down. The Lettermen did billowing movie themes. There's a summer place, they sang. Where our hearts. Will know. All our hopes. She put her face on my chest. You be the boy now, she whispered. Insects got caught in the warm putty of the windows and horseflies drifted up and down the panes. They were furry and weighted, blunt, and their heads were blue.

In winter she sent me her picture and wrote letters. Just because you're a year older than me, her last one said, is no reason not to answer.

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